［研究ノート］

From Broadsheets to Blogs and Everything In-Between

—— Teaching Students to Decode the News ——

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Abstract

The author presents some compelling reasons for teaching the skills required to evaluate news sources critically and identifies five areas that warrant teachers' attention: objectivity, media ownership, framing, diversity, and the use of anonymous sources. Such skills can be taught to both native and non-native speakers of English and adolescents and adults alike.

Keywords: Media literacy, fake news, pedagogy, empowerment.

The object of education is to prepare the young to educate themselves throughout their lives.

Robert Maynard Hutchins

Introduction

Imagine a dystopian world—no, this has nothing to do with zombies—in which a country's national debt and its servicing have grown to such grotesque and alarming proportions that the government has decided to take draconian steps in a desperate effort to rid the nation of its fiscal incubus. Not surprisingly, the ruling elite has decided simply to *trim* the expenditures of most ministries/agencies but to place the education budget on the chopping block. Let us call this fictional country "Hamelin." You, dear reader, are the Minister of Education, and it is you who must wield the cleaver! What will you do?

The Pied Piper of Hamelin

Perspicacious and with the best interests of future generations at heart, you initiate a program of curriculum distillation to determine what, among all the subjects, is the most important one to offer, and like a fine whisky that not only packs a punch but imparts a multiplicity of sensory experiences, you determine that it is reading, for if you teach a student how to read and read well, he can potentially teach himself everything he needs to know.

Your next task is to determine what genre to emphasize. Being a cultured person, you are tempted to focus on poetry. These lines of Robert Browning immediately come to mind.

> At last the people in a body
> To the Town Hall came flocking:
> "'Tis clear," cried they, "our Mayor's a noddy;
> And as for our Corporation, shocking
> To think we buy gowns lined with ermine
> For dolts that can't or won't determine
> What's best to rid us of our vermin[1]!

But you quickly realize that for all its aesthetic value poetic diversions count for naught when the yardstick of economic progress is GDP. Furthermore, you become painfully aware that the citation above, if used in the nation's classrooms, might result in your head being placed on the chopping

block, nervously anticipating the whack of the meat cleaver, metaphorically speaking, of course.

After much deliberation, you most probably will determine that nonfiction should take pride of place in your highly distilled curriculum and that a sizeable portion of your paltry budget should be invested in teaching your charges how to read a newspaper or decode other sources of news, be they paper or digital. The reasoning here is consistent with that used to factor out the other subjects and genres. A *good* newspaper, properly and consistently read, can be a multi-purpose textbook used by its readers to self-educate throughout the entirety of their lives. A *good* newspaper is essentially a classroom without walls providing real-time education for a daily price less than that of a large latte at some coffee-shop chains.

Recently there has been much discussion in certain circles about so-called "fake news," which at its best appears to be a vaguely defined concept indicating a lack of factual accuracy in a story and at its worst seems to be defined as information emanating from sources with which or with whom the speaker disagrees, usually intensely. These new perspectives on what constitutes news that is untrue deviate significantly from the tacit understanding of the subject that the public formerly held, which is best exemplified by the bizarre and sometimes ludicrous stories that are often run by supermarket tabloids. The fakeness of such stories is patently obvious to those of normal intelligence, of course, for they bear as much resemblance to news as professional wrestling does to sports. The subject of fake news in its contemporary—Trump era—or historical—checkout-counter clickbait—sense is beyond the purview of this paper. However, the observant reader will have noticed that in the previous paragraph the adjective "good" has been placed in italics, which, of course, indicates that quality newspapers are highly desirable and that by implication there are bad publications.

Students' ability to read newspapers and other sources of news critically is a skill that is essential for self-improvement and one that can be taught in English classes designed for native speakers, as well as in ESL/EFL classes, assuming appropriate adaptations have been made. In the following paragraphs I will delineate some salient issues that should be addressed in such

classes. It is important to note that there are both reliable mainstream sources of news *and* non-traditional print and online sources, as well. Perhaps it is even more important to remember that some "respectable" mainstream publications do not consistently produce quality reporting; e.g., Judith Miller and Michael Gordon's output appearing in *The New York Times* in the lead-up to the Iraq War. In the paragraphs below I will address the following as they relate to the acquisition of skills needed to evaluate the news and its presentation: objectivity, media ownership, framing, diversity, and the use of anonymous sources.

The myth of objectivity

In a recently published article in *The Japan Times*, Amy Mitchell, the Pew Research Center's research director for journalism, is quoted as follows: "Despite vast differences around the globe in government, political and media structures, there is a wide and strong consensus that the role of the news media is not to take sides on political matters, but rather *to report all sides fairly* [emphasis added][2]." Those, and I do not know whether Ms. Mitchell is part of the consensus to which she refers, calling on reporters to cover all sides of an issue fairly assume that it is possible for humans to be objective. It is not, at least not for those that are not afflicted with some disorder. Each of us sees things from a certain perspective. At the simplest and most concrete level an exceptionally tall person will see the world quite differently from someone of short stature. Indeed, to be a coherent and effective communicator one must be emotionally committed to the subject matter, which ipso facto means that the writer or speaker will be subjective. In an interview given on *Point of Inquiry*, a podcast of the Center for Inquiry, cognitive linguist George Lakoff makes these points regarding recent findings:

> [E]motion is not separate from reason…. You can't be rational without being emotional…. [Lakoff related information about a study of people who had] brain damage that rendered it impossible for them to experience emotion. For example, there are certain kinds of strokes or brain

> damage you can have that just destroy those parts of the brain that allow you to link to the emotional regions of the brain, and, ah, when that happens, you might think that people become super rational, like Mr. Spock on *Star Trek*, or something, but the opposite is true. And the reason is very deep. Ah, if you can't feel emotion, you don't know what to want. That like and not like mean nothing to you. You don't have any sense of what anybody else might like or not like about what you are going to do. And as a result, you can't choose any goals. Your notion of purpose disappears….You can't set goals for yourself. … [Y]ou have to be emotional to be rational.[3)]

In lieu of an objectivity that is neither desirable nor possible for a cognitively unimpaired person to attain, some journalists and their publishers opt for a faux objectivity in the form of the somewhat mechanical "he-said-she-said" style of reporting. This approach demands that the journalist give equal treatment to both sides of an issue. It claims to be value free. The journalist presents, and the reader decides. This type of reporting, which is apparently what many of those surveyed by Pew want, can have fairly odious repercussions. Cunningham[4)], writing in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, cites David Mindich, who showed in his 1998 book *Just the Facts*, "how 'objective' coverage of lynching in the 1890s by *The New York Times* and other papers created a false balance on the issue and failed 'to recognize a truth, that African-Americans were being terrorized across the nation.'"

For those still convinced that "he-said-she-said" is a legitimate approach to reporting, an exercise in *argumentum ad absurdum* may help to disabuse them. A little while ago, *The Washington Post* produced a short video entitled *Five Surprising Things Many Americans Get Wrong*[5)], which is available for viewing on YouTube. Aside from revealing an appalling level of ignorance vis-à-vis basic historical, geographical, and scientific facts, the report features this startling statistic: "Seven percent of U.S. *adults* believe chocolate milk comes from brown cows [emphasis added]." An adherent of the he-said-she-said school might render a report on this thus: "When Jill gets home after a long day at school, she takes her favorite brand of chocolate

syrup and places three teaspoons of it into a tall glass, slowly pours a sufficient amount of milk in, stirs the mixture completely, and then sits back to enjoy her favorite drink—chocolate milk. On the other hand, Jack, being firmly convinced that chocolate milk is the product of brown cows, sets off on his afternoon quest to locate a brown bovine willing and able to release the sweet and fully homogenized drink he prizes."

The teacher must address the issue of "objectivity" first before proceeding to the next topic. Teacher-generated articles in the *argumentum ad absurdum* vein might prove useful as an introduction followed by real examples; e.g., coverage of global warming.

Media ownership

In most cases, it is not difficult to determine ownership. A more complex issue is to anticipate what impact that ownership may have on reporting. According to Free Press, "In 2011, the Federal Communications Commission approved Comcast's takeover of a majority share of NBCUniversal from General Electric[6]."

Throughout some of its history, GE has been heavily involved in the nuclear business, both weapons and power. Indeed, one of the company's products with respect to the latter can be found in Fukushima in the form of its Mark I model reactor, which was well known for being poorly designed long before the disaster in that prefecture.

With respect to the GE example above, older students should be informed of these aspects of GE's business and encouraged to examine whether the company's connections to NBC has had any impact on the latter's coverage or lack thereof vis-à-vis stories focusing on energy and foreign policy/war.

Younger learners, too, can be sensitized to this problem by presenting them with a teacher-prepared article featuring product placement, say, for a snack food, essentially an advertisement masquerading as a news article. After the students have absorbed the content, they can be asked to consider why the writer's treatment of this product has been so positive.

Framing

Framing is the presentation of a topic from a particular perspective. A work of art is framed when the artist finishes painting the picture. The viewer sees only that which the artist wants him to see in the way he wants it to be seen. In Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, the viewer witnesses a pleasant scene of people lounging or strolling on the grass in front of a body of water. All is pleasant and serene, but who is to say that there is not a shark terrorizing some hapless swimmer who has not been included within the frame? Linguistic framing is not unrelated to the artistic variety. There are many things to consider, omission, commission, and grammatical structures, to name a few. For the sake of brevity, one example will be provided here—the use of nominalization.

A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte

According to Fairclough a grammatical form is nominalized when "a process is expressed as a *noun*, as if it were an entity.[7)]" He offers as an example of this a newspaper clipping, the headline of which reads "Quarry load-shedding problem.[8)]" The grammatical form in which the headline is written tends to obscure causality. The first line of the story, in some ways, is even worse.

"Unsheeted lorries from Middlebarrow Quarry were still causing problems by shedding stones on their journey through Warton village…." [9] If taken literally, this would put the blame squarely on those insensitive or mischievous trucks that cavalierly cast off stones as they pass through the village of Warton. "The power being exercised here is the power to disguise power, i.e., to disguise the power of quarry owners and their ilk to behave antisocially with impunity. It is a form of the power to constrain *content*: to favour certain interpretations and 'wordings' of events, while excluding others…." [10]

It is incumbent upon the teacher to sensitize his students to this very powerful tool beloved by propagandists and to illustrate the multiplicity of forms that it can take. This can be accomplished by employing the aforementioned Seurat painting. Students can be asked to speculate on what might be going on outside the borders of the canvass. After this introduction to the topic, they can be asked to read articles on any number of subjects and to exam those articles for possible omissions or the use of tendentious grammatical structures and expressions; e.g., "death tax" for "inheritance tax."

Diversity

Many readers will not be surprised by the recent findings of the Asian American Journalists' Association, which looked at the mastheads of such papers as *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* to determine how closely they reflect their regions' racial demographics.

> According to the study, minority individuals (black, Asian, Hispanic, Native American, or other) accounted for one person on the 11-person masthead of *The Washington Post*, three people on the 18-person masthead of *The New York Times*,….
>
> When it came to the diversity of the general news staff, the report said 31 percent of *The Washington Post*'s newsroom is minorities compared to 54 percent of the people who live in the Washington-Arlington-Alexandria metropolitan statistical area. *The New York Times*'s newsroom

Diversity?

is 78 percent white and 22 percent minorities, while the New York-Newark-Jersey City metro area is 53 percent minorities.[11)]

It is important, of course, for teachers to focus on underrepresented racial minorities, but it is also essential that they not ignore other voices that are often marginalized by the mainstream press. These would include workers and with respect to the American presidential elections, the barely visible third-party and independent candidates, many of whom offer fresh approaches to resolving intractable problems and whose agendas are diverse within their minority-party cohort and diverge significantly from those proffered by the two major parties. It is especially important for teachers to focus on the latter, as such candidates and their platforms are rarely featured in American newspapers and excluded from the televised presidential debates that are controlled by the Commission on Presidential Debates, which bills itself as "nonpartisan," an inaccurate label that should be replaced by the word *bipartisan* (i.e., Republican and Democrat).

At the simplest level students can be encouraged to explore this issue by reading articles to determine who gets quoted and how often. At a higher level, students can be asked to assess from whose perspective a given article is written. This may be easiest to do with business news. For example, if the story is about a strike or a work slowdown, is management quoted more often than labor? Is the inconvenience to the general public emphasized and the workers' demands and justification for making those demands downplayed?

The use of anonymous sources

There is no doubt that the practice of using anonymous sources can be justified in a small number of cases. Whether it be *The New York Times* or WikiLeaks, journalists are justified in engaging in this practice to protect sources who may suffer repercussions for revealing information of great benefit to the public. Journalists must be abstemious in their use of such sources, though.

In the excerpt below, which was taken from a short article appearing in the English-language version of *The Asahi Shimbun* entitled "North Korea supplied submarines to Iran," its use is not only unjustified but suspect. Aside from the numerous unidentified sources, the article is replete with strings that render it somewhat ludicrous; e.g., "believed to have torpedoed," "could have been a remodeled North Korean submarine," "may have been built based on North Korea's design," and "Iran imported the submarines likely for strategic purposes." In the two-column article, not a single source is identified by name!

> Seoul and Washington have confirmed that North Korea supplied Iran with submarines…, military sources said.
>
> …
>
> Iran and North Korea had initially cooperated in ballistic missile…, the sources said.
>
> …
>
> One of the photos showed a crane moving a submarine and people believed to be Iranian officials, according to the sources.
>
> …
>
> Different sources said….
>
> …
>
> Iran imported the submarines likely for…, according to one of the sources.[12)]

Students' attention must be directed at this abuse or intentional misuse of

anonymous sources. Unfortunately, it is not difficult to find other, though less extreme, examples of this kind of thing. Such examples can be used to sensitize adolescents and adults to the practice. A simple counting exercise can be most revealing.

Conclusion

In this relatively short article, I have argued for the importance of teaching students how to decode sources of news, focusing on some salient issues vis-à-vis journalism. I have not explored all the issues that warrant attention in the classroom. Conspicuously absent from this article is any discussion of visual literacy, the ability to decode pictures and graphics that sometimes accompany news articles. This is an important skill that should be mastered along with journalistic literacy, for as the cliché goes, "One picture is worth a thousand words." Also absent from this paper is any discussion of when it is appropriate and ethical to identify a person mentioned in a news article by race if that person is a member of a racial minority. When racial identification is included superfluously, it can sometimes have devastating repercussions. Hence, this, too, is an extremely important topic that should at some point be introduced in any comprehensive class of the type discussed in this paper.

Notes

1）Robert Browning, "The Pied Piper of Hamelin," *The Pied Piper of Hamelin and Other Poems*（1899）. Retrieved from: https://www.gutenberg.org/.
2）Eric Johnston, "Media Confidence at 65%: Survey," *The Japan Times*（January 13, 2018）.
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7）Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power*（Essex, UK: Pearson Education Limit-

ed, 2nd Edition, 2001, p. 43）.

8）Ibid., p. 42.

9）Ibid.

10）Ibid., p. 43.

11）Karen Ho, “Diversity in Newsrooms Has Been Bad for Decades and It Probably Won’t Get Better: Study. *Columbia Journalism Review*, July/August, 2017. Retrieved from: https://www.cjr.org/.

12）Yoshihiro Makino, “North Korea Supplied Submarines to Iran,” *The Asahi Shimbun*（June 11, 2010）.